

# Papua Visitors Feast at Croirgerraidh

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## The Papuans at Croirgerraidh

In our childhoods when we'd go over to Croirgerraidh to gather shellfish, nobody ever asked about the row of ruined blackhouses in which we'd often play. Like so many things, they were "just something from the old days."

It was therefore an emotional experience in April this year to make our way down to the very end of Loch Leurbost, through Murdina's croft at number 2, with a group of 17 visitors who mostly came from West Papua province in the Indonesian western half of New Guinea.

Leading us were Evelyn Coull MacLeod, Catherine Mary Maclean and my old school friend since Primary 1 with Miss Montgomery, Shonny "Rusty" Macdonald, who is the Chairman of the North Lochs Historical Society.

Evelyn had brought a huge yellow pot and some firewood. Together with our visitors, we crossed the little stream, the Abhainn Ghlas, and gathered mussels from the rocks over where the *feannagan* sweep down the slope. In the ruins we made a fire. With just a cup of water, we steamed the shellfish until they opened, and sat back in the sunshine and enjoyed the feast.

"This will be the first time in a very long time that a meal has been served here," said Evelyn. Our two translators repeated it in Indonesian. Our visitors had come to study land reform and community empowerment. It was part of a week-long programme for village leaders called *Healthy community, healthy land: rediscovering the art of community self-governance*.

Rusty told how Croirgerraidh had been cleared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Napoleonic wars had created a market for wool. The landlord issued leases to commercial sheep farmers, who had the people evicted. Evelyn said how one of her grannies had once lived here, but this was the first time she'd visited. They were Gillies, and it was probably after the Clearances that they settled when, for a while, the village was repopulated. Catherine Mary commented on how most of us have not been taught about such history. Only fairly recently have the Clearances been talked about.

Picture us there. Chewing on the juicy yellow mussels from out of their beautiful blue-green shells. Listening to these stories, one indigenous people sharing with another indigenous people, in those blackhouse ruins. And imagine their surprise on hearing that, a little further to the south, at Budhanais on Loch Shell, a family called Smith had also been cleared from a similar blackhouse in the 1820s. One of that family's descendants now occupies a White House.

The Papuans were astonished that European folks would welcome guests in this way. They said, "This is exactly how we'd honour visitors. We'd take them down to the reef at low tide, and gather shellfish that we'd only take on special occasions."

Rusty said he thinks it possible that Croirgerraidh might once have been the site of a nunnery in Celtic times. He bases this on a nearby place name, *Loch na Mnathan*. Perhaps that's why there seems to be a peace in this sheltered spot, that takes you deeper than the cruel evictions.

Our Papuan guests found it all so meaningful because they had also experienced colonisation in their history, starting with the Dutch. Our outing helped to set the context for the rest of their week. This saw us visit community trusts including those of West Harris, North Harris, Pairc, Point & Sandwick and the museum and Suileachan monument over in Uig, hosted by Malkie Maclean who used to live in Ceos.

These sharings let the Papuans see what land reform can do to open up blocked springs of village life. They also shared from their own experience. They have become world leaders in ecotourism, managing their own bookings and quality control through their community run Raja Ampat Homestay Association (you can find it on Google). They have even devised a signalling systems for bookings on remote islands where mobile phone networks can't be relied upon.

Part of the purpose of the week was to develop an understanding of historical trauma and how communities can process it. At the Point & Sandwick Trust they heard from Malcolm Macdonald of the Stornoway Historical Society. He said that in his childhood it was never talked about that his paternal grandfather had been lost on the Iolaire. The Papuans found it immensely moving to be taken to the Iolaire monument at Holm. They were fascinated by the sculpture of the coiled rope. One of them summed up their interpretation: "By that rope, these people pulled life back into their community." That same evening, Magaidh Smith from Achmore joined us in the Harris Hotel to talk about her recent project with stories of the fishing. She was asked why she does this, going round interviewing the old folks. She said: "If I don't do it, nobody will." It set the Papuans thinking about the need to document their own oral traditions before it's all too late.

We were hugely grateful to Evelyn, Catherine Mary and Rusty for hosting us that day. On the way back, we came up through croft number 2. Murdina sang to them in Gaelic and they responded with a choral hymn from Papua. It was probably the biggest and the best mussel feast that Leurbost will have seen for a very long time.

